

## “The 1918 Anti-Greek Riot in Toronto.”

Synopsis

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At last weekend’s “Taste of the Danforth” festival over one million Torontonians took to the streets to share in the vibrant culture and sample the famous cuisine of the city’s Greek community. While this annual event celebrates Toronto’s rich cultural and ethnic diversity, we need to appreciate that relations between Greek immigrants and mainstream Anglo-Canadian society were not always so cordial.

On a swelteringly hot weekend eighty-six years ago, Torontonians took to the streets in search of things Greek, but for a very different reason than they did last weekend. Over the course of three days and nights, August 2-4, 1918, mobs of up to 5000 people, led by war veterans returned from Europe, marched through the



*Greek immigrants in a Toronto boarding house on Church Street, 1911.*

city’s main streets waging pitched battles with law enforcement officers and destroying every Greek business they came across. Before tranquility could be restored to the city, more than 20 Greek businesses, mainly restaurants and cafés along Yonge and Queen Streets, were destroyed and their contents looted. Sixteen law enforcement officers were injured, ten seriously; over 150 rioting veterans and civilians were hurt, many requiring hospitalization; 25 rioters were arrested; and over \$100,000 (approximately one and one-quarter million in today’s dollars) worth of damage was done to Greek businesses and private property.

The importance of the riot transcended just Toronto and eventually Ottawa, Washington, London and Athens all become embroiled in what newspapers at the time referred to as the “Toronto troubles.” The 1918 anti-Greek riot is one of the darkest and most

violent episodes in Toronto’s history, and yet its story has never been told until now.

What led to this eruption of violence and public unrest? Why were war veterans at the forefront of the rioters? Why did so much of their hatred and resentment focus on the city’s tiny Greek community? These and others are questions that York University professors Thomas W. Gallant and Michael Vitopoulos and independent scholar George Treheles are attempting to answer.

Using a variety of archival sources, such as newspapers and court records, they reconstruct the narrative of the riot, beginning with the event that began it all—the forcible expulsion of crippled veteran Private Claude Cludernay from the White City Café (433 Yonge Street) by Greek waiters on Thursday evening, August 1— and ending with the restoration of peace on Monday August 5 after days of bitter street fighting and with the city under siege after Mayor Tommy Church invoked the Riot Act and called in the Militia and Military Police. In addition to recounting the history of the Toronto Greek community, they also explain why there was so much pent-up frustration among war veterans recently returned from the Western front and why that hatred was directed against the Greeks. They explicate why it was that a considerable sector of Anglo-Canadian society condoned and even applauded the rioters’ actions. Finally, as with all good history, the authors suggest some of the lessons that we in the present can learn from the past.

The most important of these are, first, that while we celebrate the city’s diversity, tolerance and multiculturalism, we need to appreciate that ethnic relations in the past were often far from amicable and that cultural acceptance



*The place where it began: the corner of Yonge, Carleton and College Streets.*



*Police constable directing traffic at the intersection of Queen and Yonge Streets, scene of some of the fiercest street fighting.*

of minorities into mainstream Canadian society came at a very high price. Second, in the uncertain world after 9/11, the 1918 anti-Greek riot reminds us that in times of crisis and war it is all too easy for the majority in society to resort to scapegoating of racial and ethnic minorities and that consequently we must remain ever vigilant to protect the civil liberties of minorities. Third, we must be on guard that in restoring and maintaining public order in times of crisis the forces of the state do not overstep their bounds and infringe on an individual's human rights, as many argued the police and militia did in their heavy-handed response to the riot. As the 1918 anti-Greek riot shows, the balance between individual liberty and public order and between freedom of expression and civil disobedience is delicate and can be easily upset. And in the tumultuous times in which we live, this is a lesson we forget at our own peril.